

Hockey is something we've never covered here at TCF, but it's time we started to dip our toe into the water. There's a lot to be excited about in Ohio when it comes to the sport of hockey. The Columbus Blue Jackets are one of the NHL's surprise teams this season. The Miami of Ohio Red Hawks are ranked #1 in the COUNTRY in Division I. And we've got the Lake Erie Monsters playing up here at The Q. Adam Burke gives us updates on all these teams in his first column ever for us.



The snow is coming. The lake winds are getting more and more brisk. You know what that means right?

That's right sports fans! Hockey season is in full effect. That wasn't your answer? Why not? Did you even know that we had a team in Cleveland again? The Cavs aren't the only team to grace the Q this fall.

I guess it may be a little bit unlikely for hockey to be the first thing that pops into your head. Nevertheless, the seasons of our very own Lake Erie Monsters and Columbus Blue Jackets are nearly 1/3 over.

Columbus Blue Jackets

We're a professional sports town. There's no question about it. Our closest geographic hockey team, that isn't in that disgusting state to the northwest, is the Columbus Blue Jackets. The Blue Jackets are off to a very surprising start, one that no experts foresaw.

Their current record of 13-10-5 for 31 points (2 per win, 1 for an overtime or shootout loss) puts them in a tie for 8th place in the always

crowded Western Conference. Just six points separate the #2 through #11 seeds. The new marketing campaign of "Carry the Flag" has created a resurgence in Columbus, a city painted scarlet and grey for years.

Understandably, it's a bit too early to get excited. But the Jackets appear to have turned a corner. They have played about .500 hockey since Ken Hitchcock was hired in November 2006 and look poised to be a serious contender deep into the season this year. Hitchcock, former bench boss with the Philadelphia Flyers, won a Stanley Cup with the Dallas Stars in 1999. He was also on the bench for Team Canada in 2002, which was the Gold Medal winning hockey team.

The team started out extremely well, but then an injury to veteran centerman **Michael Peca** really deflated the chemistry of the team. Other sporadic injuries to defensemen and then a flu bug ran rampant through the locker room and the Jackets struggled against their opponents in the Central Division for the better part of two weeks.

Far and away, this season's early MVP has been goaltender **Pascal Leclaire**

. Leclaire was the number eight overall pick in 2001. This season has been his best by far. He has already posted six shutouts, setting a team record. As of December 8, he boasts

the second best goals-against-average (1.92) and is tied for second in save percentage (.931%).

Rick Nash is finally becoming the player that everyone thought he would be. Drafted out of the Ontario Hockey League as the #1 overall pick in 2002, Nash has finally found his niche. Nash has 31 points in 28 games. The Brampton, Ontario native has recorded 19 of his points in 14 home contests.

The unsung heroes of the time are on the blueline, though. Defensively, **Jan Hejda** and **Rostislav Klesla** have been playing extremely well in front of the Jackets' netminders.

Looking ahead for the Blue Jackets: A three-game homestand beginning with the Northwest Division leading Minnesota Wild on 12/8, followed by a Monday night tilt with the reigning Stanley Cup Champion Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, and then a visit by Lake Erie's parent club, the Colorado Avalanche on 12/12.

Lake Erie Monsters

The American Hockey League's Lake Erie Monsters are just 23 games into their inaugural season. It hasn't been smooth sailing for edition number three of Cleveland's

lovable losers on the ice. So far, the team has won just seven of its 23 games, posting a 7-13-0-3 record. That accounts for 17 points. It may be the lowest total in the league, but hey, who says we aren't used to supporting new franchises through hardships? 11 of their losses are by one goal.

The newest installment of minor league hockey teams in Cleveland is affiliated with the Colorado Avalanche. The team rose from the dormant Utah Grizzlies franchise and was purchased by Dan Gilbert. Operations began after a one-year hiatus from the AHL when the Cleveland Barons packed up and moved to Worcester.

Let's give credit where credit is due- to the fans. The Monsters rank 9th in attendance averaging 5,541 per game, including their second largest crowd of the season on "Mullet Night" on December 1, and a crowd of 6,000+ on their first "Dollar Hot Dog Night" on 12/7. The fans are starting to embrace hockey again. Whether it is giveaways, part of Cavs season packages, or discounted group outings, people are still going. That is extremely encouraging to the future of hockey in Cleveland.

If you're not one of the people going, then you really should know some of the kids that we might be able to be proud of one day. Face it. Any time the Cleveland area is mentioned in professional sports, we all feel a sense of pride. There certainly are a few names on the current roster that you should familiarize yourself with.

T.J. Hensick came to the Avalanche organization as a 5'10" centerman from scUM. Drafted in the 3rd round, 88th overall, Hensick finished out his college career by amassing 69 points in 41 games during his senior season. The 21-year-old Hensick (he'll turn 22 on December 10) has racked up 13 points in 18 games to lead the team. He's a very swift skater who can wow the crowd with his stickhandling and playmaking ability. His probable ceiling is as a future 2nd

liner NHL center and he was just called up to Colorado on November 29. Two nights later, the Lansing, MI native cashed in his first NHL goal.

Cody McLeod is someone who Clevelanders can relate to. He was an undrafted free agent who worked his way through the Western Hockey League and bounced around in the American Hockey League before finding a home in the Colorado organization. He's a blue collar hockey player, scrapping along the boards and playing a sound physical game. After playing last season with the Albany River Rats, the 23-year-old McLeod has 13 points in 23 games with the Monsters. Standing 6'2" 210, he could see time on a checking line at the NHL level in the very near future.

Three Monsters, **Cody McCormick, Kyle Cumiskey**

and the aforementioned Hensick have already been called to the parent club. Kyle Cumiskey may have been the most gifted player for the Monsters before his call up. An extremely fluid skater with an eye for finding the open man and

a knack for turning defense into offense, the team's offensive production has suffered without him.

Looking ahead for the Monsters: The back end of a double dip at home with Rockford on 12/8 and then three straight in the North Division of the AHL Western Conference with Syracuse at home and a back-to-back twin bill in Winnipeg against the Manitoba Moose.

College Hockey

At this point, I would like to bet Larry Hughes's salary that very few of you have any idea that our state boasts a division one #1 team. If I told you that it was in hockey, would you know who I'm talking about?

All of you Miami of Ohio grads, be proud. Your alma mater's college team is #1 in the country. They are #1 in both the USCHO/CSTV rankings and the USA Today/American Hockey Magazine rankings. In fact, they grabbed 48 of the 50 first-place votes in this week's USCHO poll. Playing in the rough and tumble CCHA, their only blemish has been a 2-1 defeat to the University of Notre Dame. The Redhawks have not allowed more than two goals against in any game this season.

Paced by senior forward **Ryan Jones** (14 goals in 15 games) and his supporting cast, junior forwards **Justin Mercier** (12 goals in 14 games) and **Brian Kaufman**

, Miami has gone 10-1 in the CCHA, with a goal differential of +29. Overall, they are 14-1, scoring 66 goals and allowing 19.

Goaltender

Jeff Zatkoff

is 11-1 with a 1.33 goals-against-average, tops in all of DI college hockey.

In their last game, Miami shut down the University of Alaska-Fairbanks Nanooks, 3-1, giving them a six-game winning streak. Ryan Jones picked up a natural hat trick in the contest after UAF scored first.

Looking ahead for the RedHawks, they will finish up at home with Alaska on 12/8 and then travel to Rensselaer for back-to-back

road tilts on 12/14 and 12/15.

Hockey constantly takes a back seat in the Cleveland sports landscape, but we've got three teams that sports fans should take notice of. The Monsters may have a poor record, but six of their last seven losses are by just one goal. The Jackets look to be one of the better teams in the Western Conference early on. The thug mentality of Miami er.. sorry, wrong Miami. The RedHawks are playing stalwart defense and leading the country's college hockey polls.

Great things are happening with Ohio's hockey teams and it's time to give them the recognition they are due.